EWA KOWAL

Iconicity of Experience in Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*

> *Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.*
>
> *Ian McEwan, in an article for* The Guardian, *September 15, 2001*

In one of his interviews, given in August 2003, when *Windows on the World* was first published, Frédéric Beigbeder said (referring also to another French writer, Luc Lang): "we aren't the first people to have written about September 11; there are already thousands of books on it. Almost all of them have tried to answer the question: Why? Very few wondered: How? And so I wanted to invent what might have gone on, to imagine it." By analogy, I am not the first one to write about *Windows on the World*; there are already hundreds of reviews and articles on it. But almost all of them have tried to answer the question: Why? Did he have the right? Hardly anyone has wondered: How? And so I wanted to invent, to imagine, how it was written. In the era of so-called open text, and of the reader being so loudly declared its co-author, I believe it is not enough to write detached criticism about *Windows on the World* – which reflects the author's view (2003): "I don't think it's possible to write pure fiction about September 11; the personal perspective of the writer is important, too."

Beigbeder's personal approach is best summed up by his words in the blurb on the back cover: "The only way to know what took place be-

tween 8:30 and 10:29 in the restaurant on the 107th Floor of the North Tower, World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 is to invent it." For this he has been accused of disrespect (to say the least), while his whole effort, the whole task of writing was a great, and – I believe – honest homage to the dead, to whom he dedicated his book. He paid his greatest respect to them by attempting to live through their death – in the only way possible for a living person: imagining it – and expressing it through what I will call iconicity of experience.

"It's interesting to be a little schizoid, – said Beigbeder (2003) – interesting to write complicated books, books that are contradictory and even unbearable. The novel is truly the highest realm of freedom" – because, he added – "[it] is a very accommodating genre – you can do anything with it – so I mixed elements of the newspaper article, the pamphlet, the novel, and the essay. The rest is simply a question of construction, of structure . . ." Yet it is exactly this rest of the book, the structure, that has been passed over in silence in most, if not all, analyses – and so it will be the subject of my paper.

Many will find the omission fully appropriate. *Windows on the World* has been praised for its courage and condemned for its audacity, called compassionate and moving and cynical and distasteful. But among both the enthusiasts and the opponents there seems to be a singular agreement to speak little about the book's literary merit. Of course, there is an obvious reason: the sensitive subject overshadows it, and for the enthusiasts the author's very undertaking of the problem is enough to render the merit high, for the opponents the same reason is enough to dismiss it as nonexistent. Even the enthusiasts could say that in the face of human suffering metaphors can wait. For many, one year and a half later, when this book was written, it was too early to create them. Still now, many will ask: is it not too early to *artistically* analyse them? Nonetheless, I believe that this book deserves more serious *literary* attention.

The fame or infamy which the novel has earned stems from the fact that it is about the Twin Towers, and the book looks *inside* them, and is written by an *outsider*, a Frenchman. It is written in two alternating modes of narrative, both first-person. One belongs to the author, who records his reaction to the tragedy and also writes his own autobiography, and the other one is shared by Carthew Yorston (who has a lot in common with the author and serves as his delegate inside the tower, a

useful insider for the outsider), as well as by his two sons, David and Jerry.[1] The narratives of these fictional characters trapped in the North Tower, as well as all references to the tragedy are based on the author's own research and closely follow, in fact are quotations from, actual telephone conversations, interviews and witnesses' accounts derived from at least two documented sources, a "New York Times" article, *102 minutes: Last Words at the Trade Center*, and Dean E. Murphy's book *September 11: An Oral History* – both of which have been listed in the acknowledgements at the end of the novel. Despite this paradocumentary aspect,[2] the fact remains that in a fictionalized form, the novel gives voice to the dead, who could not, and never will be able to, tell their own stories.

This is the crucial paradox of the book: while writing about September 11, Beigbeder says: "It's impossible to write about this subject, and yet impossible to write about anything else" (8:32, E:8/P:16),[3] and he calls his book "an attempt – doomed, perhaps – to describe the indescribable" (8:46, E:57/P:55).

The indescribability results first and foremost from the scale of the event, but also two more hindrances are present: the distance in time and space. Beigbeder tries to solve this difficulty by balancing the novel's narrative structure. The time in the novel is at the same time its space – the structure. The novel lasts "an hour and three-quarters" (8:32, E:6/P:14) – the author says – as long as the tragedy of September 11, as long as an average Hollywood film (8:48, E:63/P:59), as long as hell (8:32). In fact, the text is divided into exactly 120 minutes: between 8:30 and 10:29. Split in half, the time gives two equal hours: 1 and 1. This contains, chronologically speaking: 16 minutes preceding the first attack (which happens to mirror the 16 minutes between the attacks), then the duration of the tragedy, the 102 minutes between 8:46 and 10:28 plus one additional minute which the author gives himself when everything is over – to start again at 10:29, and come back to life, albeit flying on board of a deadly supersonic airplane.

[1] There are four fragments narrated by the younger son David (9:09, 9:11, 9:31, 9:37), and two by Jerry (9:21, 9:25).

[2] Which is also enhanced by including photographs in the book.

[3] The numbers indicate the heading of the chapter and pages in the English (E) and Polish (P) translations.

In the last but one minute of the novel, 10:28, the text is shaped into two towers, with the hour extended vertically like an antenna. This graphic design, and a conscious authorial decision concerning the physical appearance of the text, is a clear and obvious signal of liberature,[4] otherwise known as the *architecture* of the word, and a project of total reading. Its main proposition is that reading involves much more than just words: a book is read as a whole, the physical shape of the text and of the book as an object is read and interpreted as well, and every element of the book, including the cover, is treated as its legitimate and literarily significant part.

It is significant, as well as paradoxical, that the towers appear – physically, in the text – exactly at the moment when they disappear – when the second one collapses at 10:28. And they remain, on the page, unlike the real buildings in reality. This literally and visually corresponds with the author's view that "when buildings vanish, only books can remember them. . . . [B]ooks are more permanent than buildings" (9:10, E:137/P:126). The moral is that the author practices what he preaches. This particular observation is preached during the author's pilgrimage, as he calls it himself, through Montparnasse, where he is retracing the steps of Ernest Hemingway, described in *A Movable Feast* (9:10, E:135/P:124). The author's peregrinations demonstrate the contrast between his "movable" perspective and Carthew's – "immovable," fixed position. However, the sad irony in what we might call a play on words ("movable" / "immovable") is that Carthew Yorston is a real estate agent, dealing in immovable property, who dies because a piece of it is suddenly made movable – like Hemingway's lost home: "All that remains of it is a book: a movable edifice" (9:10, E:137/P:125). "This is one of the lessons of the World Trade Center – says Beigbeder – that the immovable is movable. What we thought was fixed is shifting" (8:32, E:8/P:16).

Which should make us shift our fixed notions on the autobiographical novel. The visual design I have just described is the most literal realization of what the novel is meant to display as a whole: the inside of the author and, concurrently, the inside of the tower. The two blocks of text are filled almost entirely with the author, like glass containers filled

[4]The term was introduced in 1999 by a Polish experimental theatre director, Zenon Fajfer. See Bazarnik and Fajfer.

with black letters. However, the paradox is that, in spite of it, the author is extremely elusive: as he says, he is "writing an autobiographical novel not to reveal [him]self, but to melt away" (9:50, E:241/P:213). Looking at the textual towers, it is worth recalling the striking scene when these words are uttered, when the author sees his reflection in "the tinted windows of the glass towers" (9:50, E:241/P:213) in New York. "A novel is a two-way mirror behind which I hide so I can see and not be seen. – he says – The mirror, in which I see myself, in the end I give to others" (9:50, E:241/P:213). Clearly, the author is both on the silvered and the transparent side of the glass; we could imagine him both in the street and inside the building, catching a glimpse of "the tall, stooped silhouette in a black coat, a heron with glasses walking with enormous strides. Fleeing the image [he walks] faster, but it follows [him] like a bird of prey" (9:50, E:241/P:213). Having the mirror passed onto our hands, we also reflect the author, become involuntary voyeurs before we know it, see *him* without being seen. And then we see *ourselves*. We prey on him and fall prey to his – double – exposure: of himself and us.

This paradox, turning the book into an escapist autobiography, is one of many contradictions so consistently appearing in the novel, which, in fact, is also a strange memoir without memories. The crucial thing about *Windows on the World*, as I read it, is that it is built on a series of reversals, a collection of opposites and the relations between them, which could be defined as blurring the border-lines. They include such basic pairs as: reality / fiction, inside / outside, up / down, immovable / movable, father / child, human / inhuman, and also, masculinity / femininity.

The first one, reality / fiction, is especially significant. Beigbeder calls his book a "hyperrealist novel." "Writing this hyperrealist novel – he said – is made more difficult by reality itself. Since September 11, 2001, reality has not only outstripped fiction, it's destroying it" (8:32, E:8/P:15). I must imitate this statement: speaking *about* this hyperrealist novel has become difficult because of reality. The difficulty lies in using the available and hitherto used tools. What *they* allow us to see is a historically-bound and possibly seasonal sensation. Once the emotion is passed – the book may just as well be passé, as more and more *faction*, fresh responses

to life that goes on, is being, and will continue to be, written.[5] However, what I believe will distinguish this book from others is the figure of the author. The reader taking on the task of reading and speaking about *Windows on the World* seriously and responsibly must pay more attention to the author, and this means taking the same risks as he took; in other words – empathy and crossing boundaries: a hyper-reading.

This reading puts us in the same position the author put himself in when writing. Analyzing the structure of this book is like entering an attacked building, and to do this is crucial – especially in the case of this novel, about two, in fact three towers – in fact, about towers in general, about human constructs – and us in them: social constructs.

As I have shown above, the architecture described in the novel and the architecture *of* the novel are inseparable. They form a dialogue. "Dialogism – to use Bakhtin's idea – is a form of architectonics, the general science of ordering parts into a whole. In other words, architectonics is the science of relations" (Holquist 29). The book cannot be separated from its subject matter, but between the subject and the framework there is also the relation between them. And, to refer to Bakhtin again: "It is the relation that is most important of the three, for without it the other two would have no meaning. They would be isolated, [while] nothing is anything in itself" (Holquist 38).

In *Windows on the World*, nothing is anything in itself. The text is a tower is the author. The author compares himself to the towers, saying that they are peers.[6] What is more, he also compares himself to a plane that tended to crash, the Concorde: he is both the building and the airplane. Therefore it is no wonder that he says about himself: "It's a rare thing, a writer afraid of the book he's writing" (9:46, E:234/P:207). The book is an autobiography – and so he is afraid of himself, being a hazard to himself. He calls his life a catastrophe many times;[7] his life is fragmented, and so is the narrative. The book resembles the collapsed building.

[5]In fact, 2005 has already witnessed the release of half-dozen novels related to September 11, not to mention more documentary books, and this certainly is just the beginning.

[6]Beigbeder was born in 1965; the project of WTC was completed in 1964, work on it started in 1966.

[7]"My life is a disaster" – 8:38, E:30/P:34; 9:22, E:169/P:152; 9:26, E:181/P:161; 9:40, E:220/P:195.

It is striking that the next thing we encounter, after the title page, the two epigraphs (by Walt Whitman and Kurt Cobain) and the dedication (to the author's daughter and the 2 792 victims of the terrorist attack), are two "lightning rods" – usually to be found on top of buildings. Here, they are verbal amulets, against the words that follow, the author's own – and the words they will no doubt provoke. Soon enough, it becomes clear that the novel courts disaster like a very tall building. The text *is* a dangerous place: what is more, it has no way out, as the author says, it is a "dead-end novel" (9:54, E:249/P:221). The second charm, or rather gargoyle, meant to scare away daemons, is by Marilyn Manson, and says: "The function of the artist is to plunge into the depths of hell." Beigbeder does it voluntarily throughout the book, and the paradox is that, for half of the book, he does it – in Ciel de Paris, the place closest to the heavens in the whole capital of France. The top of Tour Montparnasse, where the twin place of the restaurant Windows on the World is located, is where he is writing *Windows on the World* – significantly, in the morning, at the twin time of the tragedy. This symbolic attempt at affinity between the author and the subjects of his study is the first instance of iconicity of experience. The place and the time of the action, which is the process of writing, mirror, as much as they can, the place and the time of the parallel second action embedded in the first one (i.e. writing), and resulting from it.

In order to expand on the concept of iconicity of experience, I would like to refer to, and interpret, one illustration. It contains the already mentioned set of reversals and contrasts – with the most fundamental one here: up / down. I find this record very telling, because it refers to a very early memory, and the notions of childhood and infantilism are crucial in the novel.

At the age of ten, the author recorded his childhood impression of the World Trade Center on a Super-8 camera, and, as he says now, as a grown-up man, twenty-seven years later, it was his "first contact with metaphysical" (9:52, E:247/P:218).

> It was the first time I realized that being on the ground looking up was as frightening as being high up looking down. . . . The energy that had inspired these constructs was not human. Even so, the space between the pillars had been calculated by the architect to precisely equal the span of my father's shoulders. . . . Above our heads, the two towers seemed to merge, welded

> together like a triumphal arch, an upturned V. Only a timid band of sky regretfully separated them. To build such a monstrosity you had to be mad or have the soul of a child, or both. I was astonished at the passersby who went about their business without realizing that they were weaving beneath a giant's legs. Above their heads they had balanced a dangerous whim.
>
> (9:52, E:247/P:218)

What we are made to see here is that up is down and down is up – when the unit of measurement is an emotion: fear. This tells us something about the author's point of view: being distant does not mean that closeness is impossible. The perspective is relative, but in their extreme forms, the two opposites (up / down, close / distant) arouse the same reaction in terms of intensity; they seem to touch, as if divided only by a thin ribbon. Like the two towers forming the upturned letter V.

Victory in reverse is defeat. The greatness of the towers, of the triumph of technology, is measured by the horror of their collapse. Standing at their feet, in a memory, the author as a child is a reader of giant writing, spelling a prophecy, whose meaning will not be made clear until years later. But already then it is just a matter of time: the "timid band of sky" can reminisce, or rather proleptically symbolize, the timid white band a passing airplane leaves behind in the sky; the tower is a sign hanging above people's heads, like the sword of Damocles. The danger is written into it, encoded in it, included in the design – as Paul Virilio would say.

It is significant that the author went to the exhibition organized by Virilio, France's most famous commentator on technology, urbanism and social degeneration, often labeled, simply, a technophobe. His basic message, expressed in the foreword to the exhibition, entitled "Ce qui arrive" (What is Coming; translated into English as "Unknown Quantity"), is that the increasing development of accidents is an indirect consequence of man's inventions. Practically, the goal of the exhibition was to create, as he said: "a pilot project for, or more exactly a prefiguration of, the future Museum of the Accident." Virilio's invention, however, "a new kind of museology and museography," may itself bespeak its own disaster, since, as he says: "Daily life is becoming a kaleidoscope of incidents and accidents, catastrophes and cataclysms, in which we are endlessly running up against the unexpected, which occurs out of the blue, so to

speak. In a shattered mirror, we must then learn to discern what is impending. . . ."

It could be said, therefore, that there is no need to create such a museum, to provide specially allotted space for it, open on certain days, between strictly defined hours, since its actual exhibits can happen anywhere and anytime. In fact, the very nature of "accident" demands that it is not arranged, as this would render it artificial and fake. The conclusion is that the only truly authentic space for this new museum, which the reality of our times requires, is the space we live in. The museum becomes not a place, but a way of looking, a mode of perception. The traditional notion of a museum, a space for art, has transgressed its boundaries: it has no walls any more – except the walls that surround us and sometimes fall on us.

The reason why I have spoken about Virilio and his exhibition is that I see an analogy between this new concept of a museum, and Beigbeder's 21st century novel. This novel also transgresses its boundaries. It is also a way of looking; not only reading. The subject of *Windows on the World*, the catastrophe, evades boundaries – thus the book, to at least *attempt* to give justice to it, must do the same and evade the book-cover, its border, as well. And so must the reader. This does not mean, however, that the text ceases to be literature. It is literature plus more – which I understand not only as the iconicity of language, the physicality of the object, the book, but also as the physicality of the author, the iconicity of experience.

"For me to be able to describe what took place on the far side of the Atlantic – said Beigbeder – a plane would have to crash into the black tower beneath my feet. . . . If a Boeing were to crash below my feet, I would finally know what it is that has tortured me for a year now" (8:32, E:8–9/P:16). As it is, he says: "I will never know if what took place is as I imagined, nor will you" (10:28, E:307/P:273), and "even if I go deep, deep into the horror, my book will always remain 1350 feet [410 metres] below the truth" (9:06, E:124/P:114). This, of course, is true. Nonetheless, the author acted out, in a kind of performance "staged" during the period of writing, approximately from September 2002[8] till March 2003, all that was within his power to get close to the experience, the unreachable.

[8]In fact, in the interview quoted here, Beigbeder said that he "started taking notes at once."

The concept of limit in mathematics could serve as an analogy here. The author knows he will never get to this limit; he knows that we know it. All he can do are small gestures, with the future accusations of theatricality encoded in them – like disasters in inventions. Still, he does not refrain from carrying them out. Walking 56 floors downstairs, in a building which has *not* been hit by an airplane, in order to imagine what people might have felt like that morning (9:04, E:116/P:106), does not make him a superhero. However, just as going to the roof of Tour Montparnasse, measuring the time in the lift, going to three exhibitions devoted to the tragedy (9:08, 9:24, 9:32), flying to New York, and, finally, as the symbolic gesture of closing his eyes in the last scene of the book – this gesture is meaningful in *my* eyes. It holds the key to understanding the simple truth: until we, ourselves, make the effort, the minimum (or maximum) effort, and try to individually *imagine* what it might have felt like, even the most detailed and reliable information will not do the job for us.

It is not television that has made me think about the tragedy, but this book. Beigbeder "forces me to face that part of my humanity which is not humanist" – just as Virilio forced him before (9:08, E:131/P:120). "I would gladly wash my hands of [it]. . . . And yet, like every human being, at a microscopic scale, I am complicit" (9:08, E:130/P:119–20), says Beigbeder. On a yet smaller scale, if this novel is a dangerous invention, or, to some, a blasphemy, a transgression of moral rules, or just good taste – I am complicit, too, as a reader. What is designed into this project is also the accident of my reading.

"Will I be able to look myself in the eye after publishing this book?" (9:08, E:130/P:120), Beigbeder asked himself leaving Virilio's exhibition – in an autobiographical novel, which is a form of exhibitionism, in this case: exhibitionism about the subject of Virilio's exhibition. Two exhibits are put side by side: the tragedy and the author's life. Beigbeder is well aware of his iconoclasm: "In leaning on the first great hyperterrorist attack – he will say later – my prose takes on a power which it would not otherwise have. This novel uses tragedy like a literary crutch" (10:24, E:301/P:267). Carrying out a serious literary analysis, a meticulous reader must also ask him / herself: "Does one have the right? Is it normal to be quite so fascinated by destruction?" (9:08, E:129/P:119) – and then be prepared to possibly "admit that my eye [also] develops a taste for the horrific" (9:08, E:130–31/P:120).

Humans are often not human in this novel. They are reduced to "a hunted animal," "a brute beast" (9:17, E:153/P:41), "lambs being led to the slaughter" (8:51, E:72/P:67), "pigs with their throats cut" (10:01, E:265/P:235), or even meat (10:08, E:275/P:244) – because this is what the tragedy, the inhuman attack did to them. Or perhaps, because sarcasm comes from Greek "to tear the flesh," but Beigbeder keeps it solely for himself. "I circle the building like a vulture in search of corpses. . . . A writer is a jackal, a coyote, a hyena" – he says (9:50, E:240/P:213). "Birds of a feather flock together," that is why he accuses himself of being "infatuated with ruins": he is ruins himself (9:36, E:211/P:187). His heart is "shattered like a window" (10:18, E:289/P:257). He is the carcass, and the predatory bird with a sharp beak; the collapsing tower, and the plane that crashes into buildings. Comparing it and himself to a bird, he says, "its beak is even more hooked than mine" (9:18, E:156/P:143). This correlates with his pointed self-irony as well as chin. The plane is echoed in the image of the dragon defeated by St. George in the sculpture in the New York UN headquarters, entitled "Good Defeats Evil" (9:54, E:250/P:222). The chin of the Genius of Evil, "a strange monument erected in Baudelaire's honor" in the Montparnasse cemetery, surveying the Tour Montparnasse, is also said to be pointed (9:04, E:117/P:107). Consequently, as can be seen, the author, the living man, is one with his creation. He is both the material and the hands that shape it.

In *Windows*, humans, reduced to objects, become artificial constructs of humans, while on the other hand, human constructs become anthropomorphized, or at least animated. The borderline between humans and machines becomes fluid, when they are turned into alloys in the fire of destruction (9:17, P:141; this fragment is omitted in the English translation[9]). Their bodies are compared to Rodin bronze sculptures – crashed art (10:08, E:275/P:244). The plane that crashes is "a Paleolithic bird" (9:02, E:110/P:101), "a white gull" (8:44, E:50/P:50), and

[9]Along with several other politically incorrect (racist, religious, sexual) comments which an English-speaking – and especially American – reader might find offensive; particularly the controversial pornographic scene at 10:15 is almost entirely cut out. As a Polish reader, I am expected to be more distant, less sensitive, and so – I am allowed to read it. Unlike the author's self-censorship, this censorship is not indicated in any way – apart from the statement "This English language edition differs in parts from the original French," lost on the page with the publication data.

a shark (10:29, E:309/P:275); the two towers are uprooted trees (10:08, E:276/P:244), "a giant's legs" (9:52, E:247/P:219), and "the legs which supported the American dream" (9:48, E:238/P:210); they "roar like a wounded dinosaur, like King Kong" (10:05, E:271/P:241), which is a particularly original reversal, and one of very numerous references to film imagery. New York is an ill body, and the night is a thermometer with which the author measures its temperature (9:38, E:214/P:190). The night "blushes with embarrassment," looking at Ground Zero, because now it can be visited with a tourist guide (10:25, E:303/P:269). Doubt can be seen everywhere, the author says (10:06, E:272/P:242): "Cars doubt. Supermarkets doubt. Parking lots aren't sure of anything anymore. Deconsecrated churches . . . doubt themselves. . . . Billboard ads feel ashamed. Airplanes are frightened of frightening people. Buildings put the past behind them" (ibid.).

And so does the author. When all is over, in the last additional minute, he flies back home. And yet he never returns there, as his living / writing *Windows* is forever relived in every new reading.

Every book-cover works both ways. It covers the inside of the book, but turned inside out, reversed, like the letter V, it covers the outside as well, it covers us. We are in the book not only when we read. *Windows on the World* is an autobiographical novel, whose cover is the author – he is both inside and outside, the cover is the place where the worlds meet – like in a transparent mirror. I would suggest that, like Johnson, Beigbeder wrote the truth in the form of a novel – the truth of his life and, on the basis of available documents, of the death of the victims. Writing fiction of the dead was the fact of the author's life. Writing meant living through it: the author's life at the time of writing is part of the book. The only truly authentic way of writing about the new accident / catastrophe-ridden reality is writing about one's life. Not writing about it, excluding it, or translating it into "proper" fiction, flinching from "I" into the safe 3rd person narrative – in this novel – would have been like Virilio's transplanting accidents into the pre-arranged space of a museum.

* * *

One of numerous literary references in the novel, and a significant one, is to J.K. Huysmans's *A Rebours* (8:48, E:63: *Against the Grain*/P:60). One of the significant, recurring images in the book is the reversed letter R in

the brand name "Toys 'Я' Us," which gives the impression of having been written by a child. To read it correctly, we would have to put a mirror to it and then the result is quite striking – it says: "We R Toys." On September 11, Beigbeder informs us, one of the colossal billboards on Pier A in New York, urged its readers: "Think Different" (10:08, E:275/P:244). I think there could be no better slogan to be applied to this truly carnivalesque novel.

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